

Renewed Moral Ownership: The Professional Ethic as a Shield Against Moral Injury

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Introduction: Moral Ambiguity and Betrayal-based Moral Injury

Modern Soldiers operate in morally complex environments. If those environments create just war ambiguity, the “why” of the Soldier’s mission can become dangerously unclear. Without a firm moral foundation grounded in a just “why,” war becomes a spark for betrayal-based moral injury. Soldiers who believe they have been forced to participate in immoral military action may suffer profound psychological wounds. This paper argues that the most effective shield against this form of moral injury, given the uncertainty of just war, is a renewed commitment to the Army ethic and to justice in war. This paper will first explore the evolving nature of modern conflict and the moral uncertainty it creates. Second, it will connect this ambiguity directly to the risk of moral injury. Finally, it will propose a two-part solution: (1) an inherent professional trust in the authorities responsible for *jus ad bellum*, and (2) greater emphasis on *jus in bello* through education, moral leadership, and tested virtue.

The Just War and Modern Military Problem Set: Evolving Criteria

Determining the justness of military action has become increasingly difficult with the complexity of modern warfare. Just war theory, particularly *jus ad bellum* (the justice of going to war), no longer provides clearly recognizable criteria for the warfighter who is the action agent for complex political aims across an evolving conflict continuum. Historically, the clearest justification for war has been self-defense against unprovoked military aggression. Today’s definition of defense is not so simple. National defense involves integrating military force into all national strategies (DIME) to ensure their success.¹ Soldiers today continue to operate within their traditional warfighting functions as managers of violence, but within the conflict continuum, may not necessarily function within the category of “war.”

In fact, most military operations occur at the lower end of the violence spectrum, with objectives that do not reach levels of vital national interest or survival.² Therefore, Soldiers will conduct operations to shape environments and set conditions favorable to the U.S. in “non-traditional” defensive ways. That use of military force may have a less widely understood moral foundation than just war theory gives. For instance, just war (defined as the moral use of state force against another state) is only conducted as a last resort when proportional and necessary. Modern military integration is rarely a last resort in a constant state of competition.

Further, within Multi Domain Operations, military action is almost continuously proactive rather than reactive, which may confuse the warfighter about what constitutes a just defense. Traditional Just Cause designations of “self-defense” or “protection of the innocent” seem stretched when expanded to include preemptive military action, deterrence, and informational/cyber operations, which may have long-lasting and unforeseen effects. Today’s asymmetric warfare is less contained than it has been historically, challenging what is considered proportional or discriminate because it can have unforeseen consequences to non-uniformed bystanders.

The Profession of Arms is ultimately a profession of restraint, seeking to limit suffering when and where possible, codified in the Laws of Armed Conflict (LOAC) through the principles of proportionality, discrimination, and military necessity.³ These are meant to limit the effects of war that threaten a just end state: peace. Just war, the moral complement of LOAC, is an aspirational guardrail for a society to preserve the state’s professed values while defending its own sovereignty. Considering this growing complexity of war, just war theory is inadequate if understood as a rigid checklist that ensures the morality of state violence.

Just War in an Information Age: Crisis of Uncertainty

Warfighting in an age of information amplifies the just war ambiguity of the problem set described above. Military action is recorded and disseminated in near real time, with political and informational biases framing it in contradictory ways. For example, recent military deployments to the U.S.-Mexico border to support Customs and Border Protection (CBP) presented two conflicting narratives.⁴ On one hand, the US faced a real and imminent threat to national security, being “under siege” from illegal migrants who perpetrate criminal activity. Military deployment was a proportional and necessary response to restore law and order, providing the CBP with critical support to defend the homeland. On the other hand, arguments suggested that immigration is a civil issue in which military force blurs the lines of law enforcement and national defense. Critics argued that it violated the heart or principles of the “Posse Comitatus Act” and weaponized the military against civilians.⁵

For all intents and purposes, both citizens and Soldiers are constantly bombarded with conflicting information claiming specific military actions are “just” or “unjust.” This example of conflicting beliefs about what are legal, ethical, or moral uses of violence can be linked to most military engagements in recent years. Such actions include National Guard or Active-Duty deployments to US Cities.⁶ In the same way as above, just arguments frame these deployments as necessary to protect the innocent, restore law and order, and fight against domestic violence/terror (the military, after all, swears to defend against enemies both foreign and domestic). At the same time, the unjust framing labels such actions as an abuse of power and a violation of citizen rights. These two examples, while politically contentious, represent a use of military force low on the spectrum of violence.

A further illustration involving greater kinetic military force is the targeted strikes against non-state actors, such as Narco-Terrorists.⁷ This example highlights military action in which US forces brought death and destruction to declared enemies. Just arguments of self-defense focus on drug cartels’ direct danger to US national security, with deliberate/surgical strikes against an enemy that destabilized the region and harms American citizens. Unjust arguments frame the conversation around what constitutes legitimate authority (i.e., Executive Order vs. Congressional approval) and violations of international military law (i.e., Combatant vs. Narco-Terrorist).

These examples are not meant to suggest that any of these military actions are illegal, unethical, or immoral, but highlight the contested nature of military action in an informational age. News sources, politicians, and average citizens can disseminate their perspectives instantly on a national and international stage. The primary point is that Soldiers will undoubtedly hear conflicting viewpoints on whether their military service is just or unjust. These viewpoints will most likely come without the full account of the facts, which will be described shortly.

Just War Uncertainty: a Multiplier for Moral Injury

The issue of modern just war ambiguity, coupled with the accessibility of conflicting information on the legality and morality of military force, may increase the likelihood of moral injury among warfighters. Moral injury represents a distinct type of psychological harm from a transgression of deeply held moral beliefs, either enacted or seen.⁸ This violation of one’s moral code can manifest feelings of guilt, shame, anger, loss of trust, diminished meaning, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. The lack of a clearly defined and publicly contested *jus ad bellum* opens the door to an institutional sense of betrayal-based moral injury, in which Soldiers may question their leaders, the justice of an action, or themselves in their participation. Key elements for betrayal-based moral injury are (1) a transgression of what’s right (from the Soldier’s point of view), (2) by someone who holds legitimate authority, (3) in a high stakes situation like combat.⁹ As Jonathan Shay suggests, moral injury may occur when a legitimate authority betrays what is right by ordering Soldiers to act immorally.

Using the border deployment example, a Soldier operating in an immigration defense capacity may view their mission as defending their country against invasion (just) or as an oppressive force that is harming innocent persons (unjust). While the Soldier takes an apolitical oath to the Constitution, the information they consume may dictate whether they view the authority they serve under as having deployed them in a just way or as having immorally used them as a tool for political power. In the U.S. city deployment example, Soldiers may believe they are defenders of the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic, or feel they are standing against their fellow citizens, who may even share a sense of responsibility for America’s soul. Finally, in the targeted

strike example, warfighters may believe they are destroying an imminent physical threat or question whether they are killing in an undeclared war based on justifications they cannot verify.

If *jus ad bellum* doesn't provide clear-cut moral relief for a Soldier following orders, or even worse, they are given information that provides an unjust narrative, questions of morality prime the Soldier to wonder if they have been ordered to betray what is right. Jonathan Shay describes this sense of betrayal during a reconnaissance patrol in Vietnam:

"Daylight came, and we found out we killed a lot of fishermen and kids. What got us thoroughly fucking confused is, at that time you turn to the team and you say to the team, 'Don't worry about it. Everything's fucking fine.' Because that's what you're getting from upstairs. The fucking colonel says, 'Don't worry about it. We'll take care of it ... So you know in your heart it is wrong, but at the time, here's your superiors telling you that it was okay. So, I mean, that's okay then, right? This is part of war ... They wanted to give us a fucking Unit Citation—they fucking maggots. A lot of medals came down from it. The lieutenants got medals, and I know the colonel got his-fucking medal.'"

While well intentioned restraint (via international law, LOAC, ROEs, ethical codes, etc.) is aspirational, suffering is nonetheless a byproduct of war. This story highlights the disconnect between the realities of combat, the justifications for violence, and the Soldier's personal moral compass. This disconnect widens when external voices suggest the Soldier is immoral when following orders. Even within the low spectrum of violence, Soldiers may experience moral injury if they believe their military purpose is no longer for the moral good of the American people. *Jus ad bellum* provides moral justification for the "why" of military force rather than the how. When that why is unclear, misunderstood, or contested, the Soldier's execution of that mission (the how) amplifies a disconnect between the warfighter and their leadership, with perceptions that a respected authority has made them complicit in unjust warfare.

The Soldier's Professional Responsibility: Trust

The proposition that warfighters are more primed to experience betrayal-based moral injury hinges on the idea that conflicting voices will shape the Soldier's moral perspective of what is true. As the saying goes, perception is reality. A Soldier may wrongly suffer from moral injury through wrong facts, the belief that they've committed an unjustified killing when, in fact, it was appropriate.¹⁰ While suggestions of the morality of war are presented as complete and irrefutable, it is fair to suggest that outside narratives that sway Soldier perceptions are likely influenced by assumptions, personal beliefs, incomplete facts, and limited information. A sense of moral betrayal by leaders may develop in the absence of factual knowledge of just war. It is, therefore, essential that Soldiers appreciate the limitations of just war proclamations, being, "You don't know what you don't know." Neither do all the critics who make assertions of the justice, legality, and morality of military action.

This concept of limited knowledge is an important piece of just war theory. Philosophies of just war have largely agreed that Soldiers are not responsible for *jus ad bellum*.¹¹ This is primarily because the frontline warfighter isn't equipped with a complete understanding of the political nuances and factors that lead governments to wield military force to achieve a particular political aim. Further, Soldiers do not have a choice about when, where, what, or the why of their service. The Army serves under civilian authority and honorably fulfills its oaths of service when directed by that legitimate authority.¹² *Jus ad bellum*, then, gives the ownership and responsibility for the just governance of military force to the state that commands it.

The U.S. Constitution recognizes two forms of legitimate authority for the American Soldier. Congress is the authority that declares war, makes rules for war, raises Armies, organizes and arms them, and calls them forth to suppress insurrections and repel invasions.¹³ Additionally, the President serves as the Commander-in-Chief, leading, guiding, and directing military forces when they are called into service.¹⁴ Under these authorities, who determine when military force is needed, it is impossible for the warfighter who executes these aims to know with complete certainty that the use of state violence is clearly based on just cause, right intention, a proportional response, and a last resort. The only information Soldiers can be certain of is that orders come from a legitimate

authority.

Therefore, in the absence of complete *jus ad bellum* knowledge, a certain amount of professional trust is necessary in the prevention of betrayal-based moral injury. An initial assumption of trust should be the Soldier's primary posture, given the understanding that only those with the power to call them into service have a clear picture of the just "why" of military force. Trust is owed to both the authorities that wield military power, in their commitment to law and justice, as well as to military leaders who are entrusted to execute the government's will properly. Trust is the shared confidence among commanders, subordinates, and partners that all can be relied on and are competent in performing their assigned tasks.¹⁵ Specifically, doctrine states that "developing military-technical expertise is the foundation of competence, which is in turn a significant basis of professional trust within cohesive teams. Army professionals trust each other to perform their jobs absent evidence to the contrary."¹⁶

This doctrine suggests that, in the absence of clear evidence to the contrary, Army Professionals are owed trust as experts in their field. Competency and ethicality in the Army are synonymous, as expertise is defined as the ethical design, generation, support, and application of land-power.¹⁷ Therefore, in the effort to close with and destroy the enemy, Soldiers should have confidence that every echelon of command intends to action orders that are legal, ethical, and moral within the confines of the information given them. Decisions by commanders or Soldiers responsible for planning, authorizing, or executing military action must be made in good faith and based on their assessment of information available to them at the time.¹⁸ Good faith is further defined as reasonable, professional judgment with the limited facts known.¹⁹ Army professionalism, therefore, implies an accepted responsibility for the ethical application of violence, where combat decisions are made in good faith, under conditions of uncertainty, in accordance with the Army's enduring laws and values.

These assertions that (1) only legitimate authorities have full knowledge of *jus ad bellum*, (2) Soldiers are not responsible for *jus ad bellum*, and (3) the Army's expertise is in the ethical management of violence in good faith, all culminate in the first line of prevention for betrayal-based moral injury. Soldiers should consider their own limited knowledge of the "why" behind military orders. They should appreciate that unjust assertions may be well intentioned but potentially rooted in non-fact. Finally, the two acknowledgements should instill confidence that the military is following orders in the most professional way possible with the knowledge they have. A perspective of trust limits misconceptions that the Soldier is being ordered to violate deeply held moral principles, because the leaders and authorities above them ought to be committed to the same ethic.

The Soldier's Moral Responsibility: Just War Ownership

If the previously outlined recommendation helps safeguard the Soldier from perceptions of being forced to commit unjust acts, it only provides half the solution as a protectant against moral injury. In truth, it is possible that the intentions behind military force aren't always entirely pure (either unjust or not wholly just). To that, the Soldier should take additional precautions to limit acts that would transgress their moral compass in line with the Army's professional ethic. Soldiers must take personal ownership of just war by acknowledging and understanding that they are fully responsible for justice in war (*jus in bello*). If legitimate authority is responsible for deploying military force justly, the warfighters themselves are the parties accountable for preserving that just war by managing violence ethically.

Capitalizing on the illustrations provided here, Soldiers shouldn't be morally scarred from the places they are called to deploy, be it foreign or domestic. Soldiers go where they are told and faithfully execute the intent and end state that comprise military orders. Instead, with a perspective of trust, Soldiers should shift their concern to whether they themselves understand, practice, espouse, and embody the Army ethic to carry out those orders in the most lawful, ethical, and moral way. Soldiers with a deeply held professional ethic should be less likely to participate in transgressive acts because they are rooted in a belief system about what they do, how they do it, and accept a responsibility to minimize suffering in accordance with the Army ethic. Ownership of this ethic, to know and practice it, isn't just a good idea; it is representative of a promise made to the American people that Soldiers will well and faithfully perform their duties while modeling moral character on and off the battlefield.

Army professionals voluntarily incur an extraordinary moral obligation to live by and uphold the Army ethic, including Army Values, in their decisions and actions, in all aspects of life. It is their responsibility to embrace a shared identity as trusted Army professionals ... they are professionals of character.²⁰

This ownership requires an intentional commitment to better cultivate the Soldier's ethical identity. A shared ethic is less likely to be intuitively understood than a personal morality, especially in a morally relativistic modern world. A Soldier may know their own belief system because they've always had it, but do they understand both the foundations and applications of the ethic they've agreed to follow? Further, do they embody that ethic in a way that is congruent with their own moral code, so that their disposition (or character) is to live out that professed belief? This ethical commitment should be emphasized and instilled (owned) across areas in which Shay recommends as preventative measures against moral injury: (1) unit cohesion, (2) ethical leadership, and (3) realistic training.²¹ Ethics education across these categories is essential if the ideal Army leader is to be a role model of professional competence and moral character.²²

Unit cohesion is built on mutual trust and shared understanding, cornerstones of a cohesive fighting force. That unity is not a given; it must be created. As teams change and professional maturity fluctuates, ethical unity requires the same intentional assessment and development as tactical proficiency. Professionalism is built over a lifetime, and ethical unity takes a lifetime of work. Leaders cannot assume a shared understanding of the Army ethic in a morally relativistic society. Rather, it must be cultivated through education and continuous self-development.

Mission Command demands this ethical cohesion. It assumes that, in the absence of orders or direct control, subordinates will make decisions that align with the commander's intent because the team shares a moral framework. This supposes more than technical expertise. Tactical knowledge makes the Soldier combat effective, but ethical competence determines whether force is applied justly. Without a clear understanding of the Army ethic and its character demands, Soldiers cannot be expected to apply moral reasoning consistently with the Army's professional standards. Therefore, ongoing ethics education that emphasizes the Army's moral foundations, virtue ethics (Army Values), character attributes, and demands for moral courage (ethos), becomes the building blocks of professional unity. If Soldiers are going to deploy in more complex environments, like domestic deployments or engagements with non-state actors, how much more should they be prepared to operate with moral integrity, knowing how to employ violence decisively, but how to restrain it wisely?

The stewardship of the Army ethic starts with leaders. Ethical leadership requires that leaders not only emphasize ethics education but also embody the ethic themselves and personally develop the character of those around them. Leaders should be moral standard-bearers. Army leaders are expected to be inherently moral, providing moral purpose, direction, and motivation to those around them.²³ Moral awareness and ethical competence are as important as tactical prowess for trust. A leader's ethical competency becomes the goal or the obstacle for the team's embodiment of the Army ethic. Followers cannot rise above the maturity level of their mentors, no matter how skilled or knowledgeable their mentors are.²⁴ This means that ethical decisions should be transparent. It requires leadership by example in which leaders acknowledge mistakes and hold themselves to the same moral standards they demand of their Soldiers. Prioritizing personal ethical conduct demonstrates that ethics aren't just rules to be followed, but a foundation of one's character.

Finally, ethics needs to be exercised. It is of no value or merit to say that one is virtuous without having had to practice that virtue and been found virtuous. An espoused ethic is without substance unless it is lived out. While military good order and discipline ensure that Soldiers live according to the rules, laws, and morals of the Profession, they don't fully account for ethical dilemmas and the high expectations for moral reasoning that will undoubtedly be faced in combat. Therefore, realistic combat training should include ethical components. Competence, including moral competence, is built on repetitive, realistic, and challenging training that develops unit cohesion, trust, and shared understanding.²⁵ Often, ethical dilemmas are limited to classroom thought experiments that do not account for the nuances of combat, such as the fog of war, fatigue, loss, grief, and rage that actually manifest as Soldiers make difficult battlefield decisions. Practiced ethics in realistic training serve

as a test of whether one's character aligns with their espoused ethic and, when teams show moral competence in training, provide firsthand testimony to the warfighter that those around them are committed to the shared ethic. Soldiers must see virtues in action before those actions become a basis for trust.²⁶

A clearly understood, practiced, and espoused professional ethic is a safeguard against moral injury by reinforcing a commitment to honorable service, organizational trust, and character development. It shifts the Soldiers' expectations of moral responsibility from an outside entity to its practitioners. That Soldier identity is built on education that unifies the unit through shared understanding. It is built by leaders who are themselves committed to both their own moral development and that of their subordinates. Finally, the team's ethicality must be forged by moving beyond thought exercises to create opportunities to test Soldier morality in training. These three measures are created through greater Soldier ownership of just war, in which they not only profess moral expertise but have tested, developed, and grown their character in training. While professional trust provides one blanket of protection against betrayal-based moral injury, a feeling of certainty within each Soldier that their ethic empowers them to operate morally is another.

Conclusion

Soldiers can never be fully certain of *jus ad bellum*, which is why they are largely excused from responsibility for it. However, in an era when the justice of war may be questioned, Soldiers who deeply identify with their professional ethic should feel prepared to act justly (*jus in bello*) wherever and whenever they are called to serve. A determination to act justly in the line of duty (ethical competence) is a preventative measure against moral injury in a morally ambiguous and complex operating environment.

Endnotes

NOTE: The author used an AI language model (ChatGPT, OpenAI) for assistance with editing and citation formatting. All arguments, interpretations, and conclusions are the author's own.

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